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UNCLAS HALIFAX 000007

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: HMCS TORONTO DEPLOYS

1. HMCS Toronto left Halifax January 14 for a six-month deployment with the USS George Washington carrier strike group. In a gesture of support that seemed well-received by both the crew of Toronto and their families, Minister of National Defense David Pratt and his Parliamentary Secretary David Price both attended the ceremony. Chief of Naval Staff Vice-Admiral Ron Buck, senior Canadian military officers from the Halifax area, a local MP and Consul General made up the rest of the official send-off party.

2. Toronto sailed without her helicopter, and will at least in the early phases of the deployment rely on U.S. Navy helicopter support. Flight restrictions were imposed on the aged Sea King chopper fleet following still-unexplained power losses, one of which caused a Sea King to crash on the deck of HMCS Iroquois. MARLANT chief of staff told CG that the hope is to have restrictions on Sea King use lifted and a helicopter either shipped or airlifted to Toronto by the end of March. There was one good aspect to the chopper's unavailability: MND Pratt and Vice-Admiral Buck were able to make their remarks to Toronto's crew in the frigate's unused helicopter hangar, which provided some shelter from the -35 Celsius wind-chill outside. While neither Pratt nor Buck used the opportunity to mention the Sea King replacement program, both noted the importance of this deployment as a tangible manifestation of Canada's commitment to the war on terror, and Buck stressed that the Canadian Navy was the only one in the world that could do a one-for-one replacement of a USN ship. Atlantic Fleet Commander Commodore Ty Pile told CG said that he was extremely grateful for the "phenomenal" cooperation the USN had provided to the Canadian Navy during preparations for Toronto's departure.

3. CG took the opportunity to renew his acquaintance with Pratt and Price, both of whom were conscientious members of Parliament's National Defense Committee. Price highlighted the importance that the Martin government attached to working with the USG and NATO on defense issues.

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